

Hadar's Project Zug Shavuot Companion

תשפ"ו 5786



WELCOME TO HADAR'S PROJECT ZUG SHAVUOT COMPANION

Shavuot marks the moment when the Jewish people stood together at Sinai to receive the Torah. For generations, Jews have honored this festival by gathering to study—late into the night and throughout the holiday, immersing in the sacred texts that shape Jewish life and our vision for a world redeemed.

In times of uncertainty and conflict, learning Torah can offer grounding and connection—with other people and with our tradition. We made this companion to help you enter that learning, whether with a *havruta* (learning partner) or with members from your Jewish community.

In the pages that follow, you will find a small sample of sessions from some of our favorite Project Zug courses, spanning a wide range of topics. Each of these five text-study sheets is drawn from a longer course designed for *havruta* learning over multiple weeks. We chose these sessions because they stand alone as accessible, thought-provoking lessons for people of all Jewish learning backgrounds.

There are many ways this companion can serve as a resource for you and your community this Shavuot. Feel free to get creative! Here are a few suggestions from the Project Zug team:

“I’m running a late-night program with my community”

Print copies and leave them in an open Beit Midrash space for a choose-your-own-adventure learning experience. Anyone who wants to learn in pairs or small groups can pick up the packets and choose the topic that most interests them.

“I’m facilitating a session or group discussion”

Use one of the study sheets as the basis for your class. You might learn the sources together as a group, or break into *havrutot* to explore the texts and then come back together for discussion.

“I’m planning my own personal learning experience”

Grab a partner and dive in! You can spend an hour exploring a single topic or move through several sessions over the course of the night.

Looking to keep the learning going after Shavuot? If you already have a *havruta*, you can sign up anytime to learn a Project Zug course together. If you’d like to be matched with a study partner, register during our upcoming Elul Learning Cycle (registration deadline: August 9, 2026), when we match learners from around the world. Visit www.projectzug.org to learn more.

We’d love to hear from you! Tell us how you used this companion, or explore bringing Project Zug learning to your Jewish community. Email Rabbi Keilah Lebell, Director of Project Zug, at lebell@hadar.org.

שמח and happy learning!

Project Zug and the Hadar Institute Team

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COURSE DESCRIPTIONS

“To Share or Not to Share: The Torah of Social Media” by Yitzhak Bronstein

How can Jewish wisdom help inform the ways that we communicate with each other online? While social media platforms have only been in existence for two decades, they raise moral questions that have been familiar to Jewish tradition for many centuries. This course will explore a wide range of ethical and legal concepts that touch on these questions. Rooting ourselves in Jewish texts, we'll see firsthand how approaching these present-day social dilemmas through a lens of Jewish tradition can offer unique insights.

“Money and Power” by Rabbi Avi Strausberg

Power and money introduce tricky dynamics and complicated moral questions into professional and personal relationships. In this session, we'll explore the effects of influence and how Jewish sources might advise us to respond when navigating relationships with power imbalances. When do we speak up and when do we stay silent? When do we speak truth to power and when do we flatter to avoid conflict? What moral standards should we require from those in power and what happens when they fail to meet those standards?

“Tzedakah: The Jewish Approach to Giving” by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

Why do you give? How does your Judaism affect your giving habits? This course will explore what Judaism has to say about the need to give charity: Who needs to give? How much should we give, and to whom?

“The Torah of Music” by Joey Weisenberg

Music is the soul's native language: a prayer, a divine ladder upon which we climb between the Earth and the Heavens. But music also reaches horizontally across our social fractures and dogmas and connects us one with the other. Just as it cuts the nonsense away from our hearts, music opens our ears so that we can listen to the subtle nuances and sacred whispers of the world around us. In every moment, music encourages us to ask ourselves: Can we hear the songs that are already being sung by all of creation?

“Visiting the Sick: A Talmudic Exploration” by Rabbi Avital Hochstein

Visiting the sick is an important Jewish value. We learned this as children, and yet many of us still avoid the actual visit. Illness is complicated for both the one who is sick, and for the visitor. What do we say? How long do we stay? Where do we sit? What is the real purpose of the visit?

COURSE EDUCATORS



YITZHAK BRONSTEIN

is director of the Maimonides Moot Court Competition and a member of the Hadar faculty. He is in the inaugural cohort of the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbanut North America. He studied at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Yeshiva University, and Yeshivat Har Etzion.



RABBI AVITAL HOCHSTEIN

is president of Hadar in Israel. She holds a doctorate from Bar Ilan University in Talmud. She received ordination from R. Daniel Landes and from the Beit Midrash le-Rabbanut Yisraelit and is the co-author of *The Place of Women in Midrash* (2008).



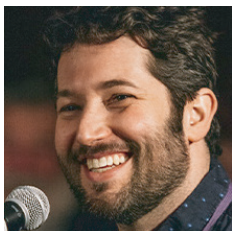
RABBI ELIE KAUNFER

is president and CEO of Hadar. He received a doctorate in liturgy from the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was also ordained. He also received *semikhah* from his longtime teacher, R. Daniel Landes, and is currently completing a book on the weekday Amidah.



RABBI AVI STRAUSBERG

is senior director of national learning initiatives at Hadar, and is based in Washington, D.C. She received her rabbinic ordination from Hebrew College in Boston.



JOEY WEISENBERG

is a multi-instrumental musician, singer, and composer, and founder of Hadar's Rising Song Institute. He is the author of *Building Singing Communities*, a practical guide to bringing people together in song, as well as *The Torah of Music*, which received the National Jewish Book Award in 2017.

ABOUT PROJECT ZUG

Project Zug empowers Jews to make Jewish learning a regular practice through one-on-one *havruta* learning. We produce self-guided text study courses and provide partner matching to enable people of all Jewish learning backgrounds to build connections with each other and our tradition. Combining structure and flexibility, Project Zug gives participants the resources to learn on their own schedule from anywhere in the world.

PROJECT ZUG TEAM



NOAH DASSA

is Hadar's Project Zug associate, overseeing our online platform, managing *havruta*-matching, responding to user inquiries, working on special projects, and working to make Project Zug learning experiences accessible and joyful.



RABBI KEILAH LEBELL

is director of Project Zug. She holds rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and lives in Chattanooga, TN.



JEREMY TABICK

is faculty and senior editor at Hadar. Jeremy received his PhD in Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he wrote his dissertation, “‘Our Holy Rabbi’: A Reassessment of the Evidence About Rabbi, His Role in the Rabbinic Movement and in Reconstructing Late Antique Jewish History.”



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To Share or Not to Share: The Torah of Social Media

Yitzhak Bronstein

SESSION 1 *Lashon Hara (Gossip)*

◆ Leviticus 19:15-18

This passage is taken from what is often called “the Holiness Code,” a loose collection of ethical and ritual law that forms the core of the book of Leviticus. An important refrain in this section is that we have to try to be “holy,” like the ways in which God is “holy.”

While social media platforms have only been in existence for two decades, they raise moral questions that have been familiar to Jewish tradition for many centuries. Our course together will explore a wide range of ethical and legal concepts that touch on these questions. Before we begin this exploration, take a few minutes with your *havruta* to discuss the following.

1. Are there particular Jewish laws or values that influence how you communicate with others? If so, what are they?
2. Where in your social media use, or social life more broadly, might you most benefit from integrating Jewish wisdom?

I. TORAH TEXT

The first source is a passage from the book of Leviticus that contains several foundational *mitzvot* (commandments) related to speech and relationships. In each unit of the course, we will dive into a different phrase from this biblical passage and explore its relevance to our discussion around social media. In this session, we will probe the prohibition of speaking gossip. As you read through these four verses, focus not only on the bolded verse, but also its broader context.

SOURCE #1

יקרא יט:טו-יח
לא-תעשו עול במשפט
לא-תשא פני-דל ולא
תהדר פני גדול בצדק
תשפט עמיתך: ¹⁶לא-
תלך רכיל בעמך, לא
תעמד על-דם רעך אני
ה': ¹⁷לא-תשנא את-
אחיך בלבבך הוכם
תוכים את-עמיתך

Leviticus 19:15-18◆

¹⁵You shall not perform injustice in judgment: do not favor the poor or show deference to the powerful; with righteousness shall you judge your kinsman. ¹⁶**Do not gossip among your people;** do not stand by the blood of your fellow: I am God. ¹⁷You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your kinsman, and you shall not bear a sin because of them. ¹⁸You

♦ Rambam

Rambam (Maimonides) is an acronym for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon who lived in Spain and Egypt (1135-1204). His most significant work is the Mishneh Torah, a comprehensive codification of Jewish law from the Talmud. In addition, Rambam wrote a commentary on the Mishnah and philosophical works, such as The Guide of the Perplexed

♦ lashes

In classic Jewish law, lashes is the standard punishment for any prohibition in the Torah that doesn't specify what the punishment should be.

וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלֶיךָ חֲטָא: ¹⁸לֹא-
תִקַּם וְלֹא-תִטַּח אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ
וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה':

shall not take vengeance, and you shall not
bear a grudge against your people. You shall
love your neighbor as yourself: I am God.

Questions from Yitzhak Bronstein

1. How do these various commandments relate to one another? Are they completely complementary obligations, or is the relationship between some of them more complex and tension-filled?
2. Are there any textual clues in this passage that help shed light on how to understand the prohibition of speaking gossip? For example, what is the relationship between the two clauses of verse 16 (the prohibition of gossip and the prohibition not to stand by the blood of one's fellow)?

II. THE PARAMETERS OF GOSSIP

In the following text, Rambam ♦ draws a connection between the two *mitzvot* in verse 16: “Do not gossip among your people” and “do not stand by the blood of your fellow.”

SOURCE #2

משנה תורה,
הלכות דעות ז:א,ג

(1) הַמְרַגֵּל בַּחֲבֵירוֹ עוֹבֵר בְּלֹא
תַעֲשֶׂה שְׁנֵאמַר "לֹא תִלְךְ רֵכִיל
בְּעַמֶּיךָ" וְאִם עַל פִּי שְׂאִין לֹקִין
עַל דִּבָּר זֶה עוֹן גָּדוֹל הוּא וְגוֹרֵם
לְהִרְגַּ נַפְשׁוֹת רַבּוֹת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.
לְכֹךְ נִסְמָךְ לוֹ "וְלֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל
דַּם רֵעֶךָ"

(3) וְעוֹד אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים שְׁלֹשָׁה
לִשׁוֹן הָרַע הוֹרֵגָתוֹ. הָאוֹמֵר.

Mishneh Torah,
Human Dispositions Chapter 7:1,3

(1) One who shares gossip against their fellow violates a negative commandment, as it is written: “Do not gossip among your people.” Although the punishment of lashes ♦ is not inflicted for violating this prohibition, it is a grave sin, and is the cause of many deaths from Israel. For this reason it is written adjacent to: “Do not stand by the blood of your fellow.”

(3) Furthermore, the sages said: “[Gossip] kills three people: the one who speaks it,

♦ severity

The Talmud (Arakhin 15b) states that speaking gossip is parallel with the prohibitions of idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed, which are treated by the Sages as the three most severe sins.

♦ rekhlut

This is based on the word translated as “gossip” in verse 16 above.

וְהַמְקַבֵּל. וְזֶה שְׂאוֹמֵר עָלָיו.
וְהַמְקַבֵּל יוֹתֵר מִן הַשְׂאוֹמֵר.

the one who accepts it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who accepts it more than the one who speaks it.”

Questions from Yitzhak Bronstein

Rambam follows a Rabbinic tradition of treating the prohibition of gossip with great severity. ♦ For this reason, the Torah juxtaposes gossip with the imperative against being a bystander when someone’s life is in danger.

In paragraph (3), Rambam references a talmudic passage about how gossip affects three individuals, though he expands on that passage by claiming it is the *listener* who is most harmed.

1. Why do you think the prohibition of gossip is regarded with such severity? Is killing an appropriate term to describe the harm it causes?
2. Rambam writes that the speaker, listener, and the person being discussed are all harmed. How do you understand the way(s) in which each of these three individuals is harmed?
3. Why might Rambam claim that the greatest harm occurs to the one who accepts gossip that they hear?
4. What responsibilities do we have as listeners, if any, to avoid coming into contact with gossip? How might this play out on social media?
5. If you feel comfortable doing so, share an experience with your *havruta* about a time that *lashon hara* caused you harm, whether in person or on social media.

III. DEFINITIONS

What exactly is gossip? Below, Rambam specifies the forms of speech included in this prohibition by breaking it down into three distinct categories, called in Hebrew: *rekhlut*, *lashon hara*, and *motzi shem ra*.

SOURCE #3

משנה תורה,
הלכות דעות ז:ב,ד

(2) אִי זֶהוּ רֹבֵל. זֶה שְׂטוֹעֵן
דְּבָרִים וְהוֹלֵךְ מִזֶּה לָזֶה וְאוֹמֵר
כֵּן אָמַר פְּלוֹנִי כֵּן וְכֵן שִׁמְעָתִי

Mishneh Torah,
Human Dispositions Chapter 7:2,4

(2) Who is a violator of *rekhlut*? ♦ One who makes claims, and goes from this person to that person, saying, “So-and-

♦ **lashon hara**

Lit. “evil tongue,” normally translated as “gossip.”

♦ **motzi shem ra**

Lit. “one who brings out a bad name,” based on the language of Deuteronomy 22:14.

על פלוני. אף על פי שהוא
אמת הרי זה מחריב את
העולם.

so said this, and I heard that from so-and-so.” Even though it is true, this is destructive for the world.

יש עון גדול מזה עד מאד
והוא בכלל לאו זה והוא לשון
הרע. והוא המספר בגנות חברו
אף על פי שאומר אמת. אבל
האומר שקר נקרא מוציא שם
רע על חברו. אבל בעל לשון
הרע זה שיושב ואומר כך
וכך עשה פלוני וכך וכך היו
אבותיו וכך וכך שמעתי עליו
ואמר דברים של גנאי.

There is an even worse transgression which is included in this prohibition, and that is *lashon hara*, ♦ one who spreads disgrace about someone else, even by telling the truth. If they are lying, that is called *motzi shem ra*. ♦ One who speaks *lashon hara* is one who sits and says, “So-and-so did this, and his parents were such-and-such and I heard this about them,” and says words of disgrace.

(4) ויש דברים שהן אבק לשון
הרע. ביצד... או שיאמר שתקו
מפלוני איני רוצה להודיע מה
ארע ומה היה... וכן המספר
בלשון הרע דרך שחוק ודרך
קלות ראש כלומר שאינו
מדבר בשנאה... וכן המספר
לשון הרע דרך רמאות והוא
שיספר לתמו באלו אינו יודע
שדבר זה שדבר לשון הרע
הוא.

(4) There are certain matters which are considered “the dust of gossip.” How? If one says... “Do not talk about so and so; I do not want to say what happened”... Similarly, one who relates gossip in frivolity and jest, as if he were not speaking with hatred... Similarly, one who speaks gossip about a colleague slyly, pretending to be innocently telling a story without knowing that it is harmful.

Questions from Yitzhak Bronstein

1. See if you with your *havruta* can articulate the core differences between *rekhlut*, *lashon hara*, and *motzi shem ra*, based on this passage.
2. Take a moment to consider which of these forms of inappropriate speech you come into contact with most frequently. If you feel comfortable, share your answer with your *havruta*.
3. Which of these is most prone to coming up in social media contexts? How might one go about reducing one’s exposure to them?

◆ **Hafetz Hayyim**

Written by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Belarus, 1838-1933), Hafetz Hayyim (literally: “one who desires life”) is viewed authoritatively on matters of proper speech. Its title comes from a verse in the book of Psalms (34.13). In addition to this work, the Hafetz Hayyim published enduring works on *halakhah*, including his Mishnah Berurah commentary on the Shulhan Arukh.

◆ **lashon hara**

Rabbah bar Rav Huna is speaking here in Aramaic, but his phrase *lishna bisha* is an exact translation of the Hebrew *lashon hara*.

IV. EXPANSIONS OF LASHON HARA

While Rambam only described various forms of speech, the Hafetz Hayyim expands the categories of *lashon hara* beyond speech.

SOURCE #4

חפץ חיים,
לשון הרע, כלל א:ח
אסור זה של לשון הרע הוא בין אם
הוא מספר עליו בפיו ממש, או שהוא
(יב) כותב עליו דבר זה במקתבו

Hafetz Hayyim,
Lashon Hara, Principle 1:8

This prohibition of *lashon hara* obtains, whether it is actually spoken by mouth or stated in a letter.

Questions from Yitzhak Bronstein

1. In what ways is written gossip similar and/or different to spoken gossip? Which is more severe?
2. Consider the various factors that make social media a unique context for sharing, such as the ease of sharing, one's potential reach, or the permanence of one's digital footprint. How might a social media user mitigate the potential harm of spreading gossip while using these platforms?

V. WHAT ABOUT SOMETHING SHARED PUBLICLY?

While the standard case of *lashon hara* involves someone sharing negative information about another person, this talmudic passage introduces two additional factors that need to be considered. In particular, whether information shared publicly can then be re-shared with others, and whether complimentary information may be shared publicly.

SOURCE #5

תלמוד בבלי ערכין דף טז עמוד א
אמר רבה בר רב הונא כל
מילתא דמיתאמרא באפי
תלתא לית בה משום לישנא
בישא מאי טעמא חברך חברא
אית ליה וחברא

Talmud Bavli Arakhin 16a

Said Rabbah bar Rav Huna: Any matter that was said in the presence of three people does not have the status of *lashon hara*.
◆ What is the reason? Since your friend has a friend, and your friend's

◇ **friend**

When sharing information in front of three or more people, it can be assumed that it will spread and become public knowledge. Therefore we can presume the speaker is comfortable with this information being found out by others.

◇ **arrived**

Rav Dimi was known for travelling between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel. When he came to Bavel, he would often come with a tradition he had learned in Eretz Yisrael that people in Bavel had never heard before—like this one.

◇ **accost him**

Rashi explains that this accosting refers to how people might now assume that the host is a wealthy individual, and subsequently ask him for money. Alternatively, now that word has gotten out that he was a gracious host, many people might invite themselves over to his home to benefit from his hospitality.

דחברך חברא אית ליה

כי אתא רב דימי אמר מאי דכתיב
(משלי כו, יד) מברך רעהו בקול
גדול בבוקר השכם קללה תחשב לו
כגון דמיקלע לאושפיזא וטרחו קמיה
שפיר למחר נפיק יתיב בשוקא ואמר
רחמנא ניברכיה לפלניא דהכי טרח
קמאי ושמעין אינשי ואזלין ואנסין
ליה

friend has a friend. ◇

When Rav Dimi arrived ◇ he said:
What is the meaning of that which
is written: “He that blesses his friend
with a loud voice, rising early in the
morning, it shall be counted a curse
to him” (Proverbs 27:14 [ס])? For
example, when one is invited to a
host, and they look after him very
well. The following day he goes out
and sits in the marketplace and says:
May the Merciful One bless so-
and-so, as this is how well he looked
after me. And all the people in the
marketplace hear this and go to the
host and accost him. ◇

Questions from Yitzhak Bronstein

In the first half of this passage, Rabbah bar Rav Huna teaches that if a person shares information about themselves in front of a group of three people, one can reasonably assume that they anticipate the information will not be kept secret. As such, it is not considered *lashon hara* if one passes along that information to others.

In the second half of the passage, Rav Dimi explains how even sharing positive information can cause harm to the one it is spoken about. By publicizing the generosity of his host, the guest unexpectedly causes trouble for him.

1. What do you think about the principle that information shared in front of three other people is not considered *lashon hara*? Should there be exceptions to this rule?
2. If someone shares personal information about themselves on social media, should that information be considered as if it was said before three people? If so, does that give other users the green light to share that information with others? What factors might it depend upon?
3. How do you understand the potential harm of sharing positive information about another person? How does this play out on social media?

Take a Step Back

It is now clear that our Rabbis treated *lashon hara* with great severity, whether it was spoken or written, true or false, positive or negative. In fact, we have seen metaphors of *killing*(!) applied to harmful speech. Yet, sometimes we do feel compelled to share information about others, even if it is not flattering. Is this ever justified? If so, when?





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Money & Power

Rabbi Avi Strausberg

UNIT 1

Money and Power

SESSION 1

When Leaders Go Bad, Where Do We Draw The Line?

◆ Talmud Moed Katan

The Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Bavli is the monolithic masterpiece of ancient Babylonian Jewry. It is built upon the Mishnah (but frequently digresses) and is mostly finished in the 6th century CE. The section of Moed Katan contains many of the laws of mourning. Mourners are in some ways cut off from their communities. In this context, the Talmud discusses the status of people who have been excommunicated—cut off from the community because of their actions.

All of the time, we are confronted by the reality that sometimes the people we hold up as great leaders, people who are brilliant artists, effective politicians, and generous philanthropists, who have given much to society and have much more to offer, can also be deeply flawed individuals. What do we do when we find out that one of these people has crossed an ethical red line? What happens to their leadership and how do we respond?

In this session, we're going to look at two different stories from the Talmud that examine this question, "Can you remember the Torah and forget the deeds," or in other words, "Can you separate an artist from his art?" When we find out about a person's moral wrongdoing, can we continue to benefit from this person's Torah, and here I mean Torah in the most expansive sense of the word, or do we lose the Torah along with the leader? What criteria do we use to access this question and is the answer to this question different depending on the field of the leader's expertise? Do we answer differently for artists and scientists than we do for rabbis and teachers?

DOES A TEACHER NEED TO BE AN ANGEL?

Take a look at the following text from the Talmud of Moed Katan◆ that deals with one such leader who is suspected to have "gone bad." As you read, think about:

1. How do the rabbis handle this case of a corrupt leader?
2. What are the competing values they juggle?

♦ **Rav Yehuda said to Rabbah...**

Rav Yehudah lives in Babylon and is an expert in Babylonian traditions of his teachers. Rabbah bar bar Hanah, on the other hand, is known for travelling back-and-forth between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel and so has access to traditions that Rav Yehudah has never learned. This is why Rav Yehudah asks him. Rabbah responds to him with a tradition from his teacher in Eretz Yisrael, R. Yohanan.

♦ **Rav Yehuda ostracized...**

If you want to learn some wild Talmud, go to Sefaria and check in on this ellipsis!

♦ **Amah**

An *amah* is literally (and usually) a forearm, but it can be used euphemistically to refer to a penis.

SOURCE #1

תלמוד בבלי
מועד קטן דף יז עמוד א

ההוא צורבא מרבנן
דהוו סנו שומעניה א"ר
יהודה היכי ליעביד
לשמתי צריכי ליה
רבנן לא לשמתי קא
מיתחיל שמא דשמיא

א"ל לרבב"ח מידי
שמיע לך בהא א"ל הכי
א"ר יוחנן מאי דכתיב
(מלאכי ב, ז) כי שפתי
כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה
יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך
ה' צבאות הוא אם דומה
הרב למלאך ה' יבקשו
תורה מפיו ואם לאו

אל יבקשו תורה
מפיו שמתי רב
יהודה... לסוף אתא
זיבורא וטרקיה
אאמתיא ושכיב...

Babylonian Talmud
Moed Katan 17a

There was a certain Torah scholar who gained a bad reputation due to rumors about his conduct. **Rav Yehudah said: What should be done? To excommunicate him** is not an option. **The Sages need him**, as he is a great Torah authority. **Not to excommunicate him** is also not an option, as then **the name of Heaven would be desecrated**.

Rav Yehuda said to Rabbah bar bar Hanah: Have you heard anything with regard to this issue? ♦ He said to him: Rabbi Yohanan said as follows: What is the meaning of that which is written: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah at his mouth; for he is a messenger [*malakh*] of the Lord of hosts" (Malachi 2:7)? This verse teaches: If the teacher is similar to an angel [*malakh*] of the Lord, then seek Torah from his mouth, but if he is not pure and upright, then do not seek Torah from his mouth; even if he is knowledgeable about Torah, do not learn from him.

Based on this statement, Rav Yehuda ostracized that Torah scholar... ♦ A wasp came and stung the ostracized scholar on his *amah* ♦ and he died...

Explanation from R. Avi Strausberg

When we begin the story, it's unclear exactly what the young scholar has done wrong and if he has even done anything wrong at all. What we know is that many rumors are circulating about his bad behavior. By the end of the story, we are told that after spending a lifetime in excommunication, many years in which he would

♦ **Babylonian Talmud Hagiga**

This part of Massekhet Hagigah is conceptually related to the verse quoted in Mishnah 1:6, “A twisted thing cannot be made straight, a lack cannot be made good” (Ecclesiastes 1:15). On this note, the Gemara discusses Aher, a famous heretic who is unable to return to the fold.

♦ **Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi**

Also known as Judah the Prince. One of the most important of the mishnaic rabbis—so important he is normally called simply “Rabbi,” without name.

be unable to take part in prayer life and no one could learn from his teachings, that he was eventually stung on his *amah* and died. Later rabbinic commentators understood this to mean that he was stung on his penis, taking this as a proof that the rumors about him were right after all, and that the nature of his death reveals the nature of his sin, i.e. sexually inappropriate behavior.

Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. Think about Rav Yehudah’s original decision as to whether he should excommunicate this scholar or not.

What was at stake for him in that moment? What do you think he was thinking about?

2. What do you think the Talmud means when it says, “If the teacher is similar to an angel of the Lord, then seek Torah from his mouth, and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth”? What is the standard that is being set? Is this a desirable standard for our leaders? Is this a reasonable standard? Why or why not?
3. Now think about this story in our context of “Can you remember the Torah and forget the deeds?”

Can we continue to learn from and benefit from a leader even if we know or have good reason to suspect that he or she is morally corrupt?

4. Why do you think it was so important to the later rabbis to interpret the word *amah* as penis? What’s at stake in this interpretation?

“REMEMBER HIS TORAH, BUT DO NOT REMEMBER HIS DEEDS”

Take a look at the stories below about Elisha ben Abuya, who is known as Aher or the “Other,” meaning the one who came to be on the outside. There is much to be said about once rabbinic insider Elisha ben Abuya, but what’s most important for our purposes is that he was once a great rabbi and Torah scholar who later was excommunicated for his heresy and disbelief in God and Torah. The first story here plays out how one can think about his legacy—can you still learn from Elisha ben Abuya’s teachings while disregarding his heresy?

SOURCE #2

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה דף טו
עמוד ב

בתו של אחר אתיא לקמיה
דרבי, אמרה ליה: רבי,
פרנסני.

Babylonian Talmud
Hagigah 15b ♦

The daughter of Aher came before Rabbi
[Yehudah Ha-Nasi] ♦ **and said to him: Rabbi,**
provide me with sustenance.

◆ Job 18:19

The verse refers to the fate of the wicked (see Job 18:5).

אמר לה: בת מי את? -
אמרה לו: בתו של אחר אני.

אמר לה: עדיין יש מזרעו
בעולם? והא כתיב לא נין
לו ולא נכד בעמו ואין שריד
במגוריו!

אמרה לו: זכור לתורתו ואל
תזכור מעשיו. מיד ירדה
אש וסכסכה ספסלו של רבי.
בכה ואמר רבי ומה למתגנין
בה - כך, למשתבחין בה -
על אחת כמה וכמה.

He said to her: Whose daughter are you? She said to him: I am the daughter of Aher.

He said to her: Is there still of his seed remaining in the world? But isn't it stated: "He shall have neither son nor grandson among his people or any remaining in his dwellings" (Job 18:19)?◆

She said to him: Remember his Torah, and do not remember his deeds. Immediately, fire descended and licked Rabbi's bench where he was sitting. Rabbi wept and said: If God sends fire to protect the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor.

Explanation from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

When Aher's daughter comes before Rabbi needing help to survive, he is quick to dismiss her and is surprised to even encounter her after her father's excommunication. In response to Rabbi's dismissive response, she argues, "Remember his Torah, and do not remember his deeds." Fire descends and touches the very bench where Rabbi is sitting and he begins to cry saying, "If God protects the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor."

Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

1. What does it mean to "Remember his Torah and do not remember his deeds"?
2. What do you think of this approach? What does God seem to think of this approach based on what happens in this section?
3. What does Rabbi mean when he says, "If God protects the honor of those who treat the Torah with contempt in such a manner, how much more so would God do for those who treat it with honor"?
4. Why does he cry?

One of the fascinating aspects of Elisha ben Abuya was how his friend and student R. Meir continued to learn from him, even after his heresy. The text of the Talmud continues questioning how he could do this.

◆ Gadol

The opposites *gadol* and *katan* (literally “big” and “small”) could refer to several different contrasts, most notably here: “big” = adult, and “small” = minor; or “big” = great in wisdom, and “small” = lacking in wisdom.

ורבי מאיר היכי גמר תורה
מפומיה דאחר? והאמר
רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי
יוחנן: מאי דכתיב (מלאכי
ב:ז) “כי שפתי כהן ישמרו
דעת ותורה יבקשו מפיהו
כי מלאך ה' צבאות הוא”,
אם דומה הרב למלאך
ה' צבאות - יבקשו תורה
מפיהו. ואם לאו - אל יבקשו
תורה מפיהו!

אמר ריש לקיש: רבי מאיר
קרא אשכח ודרש (משלי
כב:יז) “הט אזנך ושמע דברי
חכמים ולבך תשית לדעתי”.
לדעתם לא נאמר, אלא
לדעתי...

קשו קראי אהרדי! - לא
קשיא, הא - בגדול, הא -
בקטן.

And Rabbi Meir, how could he learn Torah from the mouth of Aher? But didn't Rabbah bar bar Hanah say that Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah from his mouth; for he is an angel of the Lord of hosts” (Malakhi 2:7)? If the rabbi is similar to an angel of the Lord of hosts, they should seek Torah from his mouth; but if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth!

Reish Lakish said: Rabbi Meir found a verse and interpreted it: “Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to My knowledge” (Proverbs 22:17). It does not state “to their knowledge,” but “to My knowledge.”...

The verses contradict each other! This is not difficult. This case is referring to a *gadol*;◆ whereas that case is referring to a *katan*.

Explanation from R. Avi Strausberg

The Talmud first reinforces what's motivating the question “How did R. Meir learn Torah by Aher,” by bringing the same verse we saw above in Moed Katan from Malakhi which suggests one can only learn Torah from an angel. If Aher was a heretic, certainly he was no angel of God, so how can it be that R. Meir continued to learn Torah from him?

1. According to Reish Lakish, what verse does R. Meir find that gives him permission to learn from him? How does he understand this verse?

But, then, there's a problem. There's a contradiction between the two verses. From Malakhi, we understand that we may only learn Torah from an angel and from Proverbs, we learn that we may learn from anyone as long as we only apply our hearts to God's knowledge.

2. How does the Talmud resolve this difficulty?

◆ **When Rav Dimi came**

Like Rabbah bar bar Hanah above, Rav Dimi is also known for going back-and-forth between Eretz Yisrael and Bavel and bringing traditions from there, “the west” (it is west from Babylonia, modern day Iraq).

◆ **Rabbah bar Shila found Elijah**

In Jewish tradition, Elijah the prophet never died and often appears to talmudic rabbis, and sometimes reports what is going on in heaven.

3. Which verse is talking about a “*gadol*” (whether understood as an adult or someone who is great in wisdom) and which verse is talking about a “*katan*” (which would be the opposite—either a minor or someone lacking in wisdom)? What do you think about this resolution?

Continue reading the final part of this story, and think about:

1. What are the two metaphors used to think about corrupt leaders and how we should relate to their Torah?
2. What do you think of these metaphors?

כי אתא רב דימי אמר, אמרי
במערבא:
רבי מאיר אכל תחלא
ושדא שיחלא לברא.
דרש רבא: מאי
דכתיב אל גנת
אגוז ירדתי לראות באבי
הנחל וגוי למה נמשלו
תלמידי חכמים לאגוז? לומר
לך: מה אגוז זה, אף על פי
שמלוכלך בטיט ובצואה -
אין מה שבתוכו נמאס, אף
תלמיד חכם, אף על פי שסרח
-אין תורתו נמאסת.
אשכחיה רבה בר שילא
לאליהו, אמר ליה: מאי קא
עביד הקדוש ברוך הוא?
אמר ליה: קאמר שמעתא
מפומייהו דכולהו רבנן,
ומפומיה דרבי מאיר לא
קאמר.

אמר ליה: אמאי? משום דקא
גמר שמעתא מפומיה דאחר.
אמר ליה: אמאי? רבי מאיר

When Rav Dimi came ◆ from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, **he said: In the west** [Eretz Yisrael], **they say: Rabbi Meir ate a half-ripe date and threw the peel away. Rava taught: What is the meaning of that which is written: “I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley”** (Song of Songs 6:11)? **Why are Torah scholars compared to nuts? To tell you: Just as this nut, despite being soiled with mud and excrement, its content is not made repulsive; so too a Torah scholar, although he has sinned, his Torah is not made repulsive.**

The Gemara relates: **Rabbah bar Shila found Elijah** ◆ the prophet, who had appeared to him. **He said to Elijah: What is the Holy One, Blessed be He, doing? Elijah said to him: He is stating laws transmitted by all of the Sages, but in the name of Rabbi Meir God will not speak.**

He said to him: Why? He replied: **Because he learned tradition from the mouth of Aher. He said to him: Why should**

רמון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק!

he be judged unfavorably for that? **Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate and ate its contents while throwing away its peel!** [Elijah conceded this point.]

אמר ליה: השתא קאמר: מאיר בני
אומר: בזמן שאדם מצטער שכינה
מה לשון אומרת - קלני מראשי,
קלני מזרועי. אם כך הקדוש ברוך
הוא מצטער על דמן של רשעים - קל
וחומר על דמן של צדיקים

He said to him: Now God is saying: My son, Meir, says: When a person suffers, how does the Divine Presence express itself? Woe is Me from My head, woe is Me from My arm. If the Holy One, Blessed be He, suffers to such an extent over the blood of the wicked, how much more so does He suffer over the blood of the righteous that is

Explanation from R. Avi Strausberg

At the end of the story, it appears that the Holy One is teaching Torah in everyone's names except R. Meir because he learned Torah from Aher. Rabbah bar Sheilah is surprised and argues on his behalf, "But why? He merely took the pomegranate and threw away the peel," which seems to have been the bottom line of the Talmud, so why is R. Meir being punished for that? Elijah takes this back to God and God then begins transmitting Torah also in the name of R. Meir, seeming to concede that perhaps it was permissible for R. Meir to learn from Aher.

Questions from R. Avi Strausberg

1. What do you make of this strange ending to the story?
2. At the end of the day, where does this text leave us on the question of how we should relate to corrupt leaders and their work? Do we take their Torah and forget their deeds? In what circumstances is this permissible and in what circumstances do we say that the two cannot be separated?
3. Now compare this cycle of stories about Elisha ben Abuya to our first text from Moed Katan. How do their bottom lines differ? Is there a way to reconcile them? Do you agree with one of them more than the other? If so, why?



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Tzedakah: The Jewish Approach to Giving

R. Elie Kaunfer

SESSION 2 How Much Should I Give?

Deuteronomy 14:22

The book of Deuteronomy contains the most sustained discussion of poor relief in the Torah. This verse is discussing specifically second tithe—on which, see the Rambam below.

Tosafot

The Tosafot (“Additions”) were a community of 12th-13th century French scholars who wrote comments on the Talmud.

Sifrei

The Sifrei Devarim is an ancient collection of *midrash* on the book of Deuteronomy, from roughly the same time and place as the Mishnah (3rd century CE, Land of Israel). It is typically discursive, built on suggestions (“I only learn...”), questions (“how do I know...”), and responses (“Scripture teaches...”). In this case, the passage quoted by Tosafot is not found in our versions of the Sifrei.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will examine the amount one should give to charity. There is a core Jewish idea of giving away ten percent of one’s income. This comes from the medieval period, but is anchored on a core verse from the Torah:

SOURCE #1

דברים יד:כב

Deuteronomy 14:22

עֶשֶׂר תַּעֲשֶׂר אֶת כָּל תְּבוּאת זֶרְעֶךָ
הַיָּצָא הַשָּׂדֶה שָׁנָה שָׁנָה:

Every year you set aside one-tenth (*lit.* tithe, you shall tithe) of all that you yield from your field.

SOURCE #2

תוספות על תלמוד בבלי
תענית דף ט עמוד א

Tosafot to Babylonian Talmud
Ta’anit 9a

‘עשר תעשר’ – הכי איתא
בספרי: ‘עשר תעשר את
כל תבואת זרעך היוצא
השדה שנה שנה’ – אין לי
אלא תבואת זרעך שחייב
במעשר, רבית ופרקמטיא,
וכל שאר רווחים מניין?
תלמוד לומר ‘את כל’, דהוה
מצי למימר ‘את תבואתך’
מאי ‘כל’? לרבות רבית
ופרקמטיא וכל דבר
שמרויח בו ...

“You shall surely set aside” – This is in the Sifrei: “You shall surely set aside a tenth part of all the yield of your sowing that is brought from the field every year. I only learn that agricultural produce is liable for the tithe. How do I know this applies to various forms of interest and all other profits? For Scripture teaches: “All.” It could have simply stated: “The yield.” What does “all” come to include? [It comes to include] various forms of interest, and anything that one profits from...

◆ **Rambam**

R. Moshe ben Maimon (or Maimonides), who lived in 12th century Egypt and Israel, is possibly the most significant Jewish legal expert and philosopher of all time. This excerpt is from his summary of the entirety of Jewish law, called the Mishneh Torah (“Repetition of the Torah”).

The midrashic tradition quoted by the Tosafot locates the requirement to give away a tenth of your yearly produce and profits in the verse from Deuteronomy. It seems ten percent is the norm of what to give.

But ten percent is just the beginning. In the source below, you can see the full system of charitable taxes. When you do the math, it comes closer to twenty percent. Pay attention to the different recipients.

SOURCE #3

רמב"ם

הלכות מתנות עניים ו:ב-ד

וזהו סדר תרומות ומעשרות:
אחר שקוצר זרע הארץ או
אוסף פרי העץ ותגמר מלאכתו,
מפריש ממנו אחד מן החמשים,
וזהו הנקרא 'תרומה גדולה'
ונתנה לכהן...

ואחר כך מפריש מן השאר אחד
מעשרה, וזהו הנקרא 'מעשר
ראשון', ונותנו ללוי...

ואחר כך מפריש מן השאר אחד
מעשרה, והוא הנקרא 'מעשר
שני', והוא לבעליו ואוכלין אותו
בירושלים...

על הסדר הזה מפרישין: בשנה
ראשונה מן השבוע ובשניה
וברביעית ובחמישית, אבל
בשלישית ובששית מן השבוע,
אחר שמפרישים מעשר ראשון,
מפריש מן השאר מעשר אחר
ונותנו לעניים, והוא הנקרא
'מעשר עני', ואין בשתי שנים
אלו מעשר שני אלא מעשר
עני...

Rambam, ◆

Laws of Gifts to the Poor 6:2-4a

This is the order of gifts and tithes:
Once one has harvested the seed of
the land or gathered in the fruit of
the trees, and has completed their
work, they must separate from it one-
fiftieth—this is called “the large gift”—
and give it to the Priest...

Afterward one must separate out from
the remainder one-tenth—this is
called “first tithe”—and give it to the
Levite...

Afterward one must separate out from
the remainder one-tenth, and this is
called “second tithe”—and it is for the
owner to eat in Jerusalem...

By this order does one separate in the
first, second, fourth, and fifth years of
the seven-year [sabbatical] cycle. But
in the third and sixth year of the seven-
year cycle, after one has separated out
“first tithe,” they must separate out
the remaining “tithe” and give it to the
poor, and this is called “poor tithe”...

♦ Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud was the magnum opus of the Babylonian Jewish community, compiled around the 6th century in modern day Iraq, but containing many earlier traditions. While organized as a commentary on the Mishnah, the Talmud often digresses and talks about other topics.

♦ Usha

A place in the Galilee associated with the 4th generation of mishnaic rabbis.

♦ It is also taught

This phrase introduces a citation from a text in the style of the Mishnah.

♦ and some say

There are two different traditions as to who said this saying. It was either said by Rav Nahman or Rav Aha bar Ya'akov.

Questions from R. Elie Kaunfer

You can see that some of these charitable donations go to the Temple servants (Levites), some to the priests, some to the poor, and some you keep, having to eat it in Jerusalem.

1. Why do you think this is? What are the values that this system is trying to instill?

This twenty percent guideline also, according to the Talmud, was instituted during the mishnaic period.

SOURCE #4

תלמוד בבלי כתובות דף נ עמוד א

א"ר אילעא: באושא התקינו:
המבזבז - אל יבזבז יותר
מחומש.

תניא נמי הכי: המבזבז - אל
יבזבז יותר מחומש, שמא
יצטרך לבריות; ומעשה
באחד שבקש לבזבז ולא
הניח לו חבירו...

אמר רב נחמן, ואיתימא רב
אחא בר יעקב: מאי קרא?
'וכל אשר תתן לי עשר'
אעשרנו לך
(בראשית כח:כב).

Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 50a♦

Rabbi Ila'a said: "In Usha♦ they made an enactment: The one who gives away money shouldn't give away more than twenty percent."

It is also taught:♦ "The one who gives away money shouldn't give away more than twenty percent. There was an incident in which someone tried to give away more than twenty percent and his colleagues didn't let him."

Rav Nahman, and some say♦ Rav Aha bar Ya'akov asked: What is the scriptural source? "All that You give me I will **tithe**, **tithe** to You" (Genesis 28:22 ס).

Questions from R. Elie Kaunfer

Perhaps the most striking difference is the articulation of a cap on giving.

1. Why do you think there is a cap at twenty percent?
2. Is it ever appropriate to cap charitable giving, in your opinion?

Although charitable giving seems to range up to twenty percent, the minimum standard varies widely, as seen by these medieval and modern texts below:

♦ **Tur, Yoreh Deah #249**

Also known as the Arba'ah Turim ("Four Columns"), R. Ya'akov ben Asher wrote the Tur as a compendium of all Jewish law relevant to 14th century Spain (e.g. not related to the Temple or the Land of Israel).

♦ **Hatam Sofer Responsa 229**

R. Moshe Sofer, known as the Hatam Sofer ("Scribe's Seal") after his book, was a very significant Austro-Hungarian community leader in the 19th century.

♦ **Our Rabbi Saadia**

R. Saadiah Gaon was a major leader of Jewry in 10th century Baghdad. A prolific author, philosopher, linguist, legal scholar, and disputant with Karaites, he garnered respect throughout the Jewish world.

SOURCE #5 ס

טור יורה דעה סימן רמט

שיעור נתינתה –

אם ידו משגת יתן כפי צורך העניים. אם אין ידו משגת לכל צורך העניים, יתן כפי השגת ידו.

כמה הוא יתן? עד חומש נכסיו מצוה מן המובחר ואחד מי' מדה בינונית. פחות מכן עין רעה.

Tur, Yoreh Deah #249 ♦

How much should one give?

If they can afford, give as much as the poor people need. If they can't afford all the poor peoples' needs, they should give what they can.

How much should they give? Up to twenty percent of their assets is admirable. Ten percent is intermediate. Less than this is an evil sign.

SOURCE #6 ס

שו"ת חתם סופר
חלק ב (י"ד) סימן רכט

דודאי משמע מדין תורה, כל שיש לו פרנסת יומו צריך ליתן המותר לעני, רק חייו קודמים. אבל כל שיש לו די פרנסת יומו יתר שאר ממנו לעני הצריך. רק באושא התקינו שלא יבזו אדם יותר מחומש וסמכוהו אקרא 'עשר אעשרנו לך'.

Hatam Sofer Responsa 229 ♦

It is clear that according to Torah law, whoever has a day's worth of income must give the remainder to the poor. Only one's life precedes, but whoever has enough to sustain one day, the remaining money must go to the poor. But in Usha they established that one shouldn't spend more than twenty percent, and they based it on the verse "I will surely tithe."

SOURCE #7 ס

טור יורה דעה סימן רנא

כתב ה"ר סעדיה, חייב אדם להקדים פרנסתו לכל אדם ואינו

Tur, Yoreh Deah #251

Our Rabbi Saadia ♦ wrote that a person must advance their own financial well-being

חייב לתת צדקה עד שיהיה לו פרנסתו.
שנאמר 'וחי אחיך עמך' (ויקרא כה:לה) –
חייך קודמין לחיי אחיך.

before all others, and is not obligated to give charity until they have their own financial well-being secured, as it says: “The life of your brother is with you” (Leviticus 25:35)—your life takes precedence over your brother’s.

Questions from R. Elie Kaunfer

1. What do you think is the ideal amount to give? When taking a percentage, do you think it should be of gross income? Net income? What about assets?
2. Should we determine how much to give based on our ability/affluence, or based on the level of need?
3. Which of these models of giving resonate with you most and why? Discuss with your *havruta*.



The Torah of Music

Joey Weisenberg

UNIT 1 “Where There is Song, There is Prayer”

SESSION 1 Music and Prophecy

♦ Book of Prophets

The Prophets (Nevi'im) is the middle section of the Bible, in Hebrew Tanakh, which is an acronym תנ"ך of ת = Torah, נ = Nevi'im (Prophets), and כ = Ketuvim (Writings). The Prophets is further divided into the books of narrative (“Early Prophets”) and the books of prophecy (“Late Prophets”—although calling them “early” or “late” has little to do with the books’ providence, just their placement in the Bible). Samuel and Kings are both found in the Early Prophets.

Music is a form of prayer, and prayer is a form of music. They are like two legs of the spiritual throne, mutually supporting each other. What is the prayer that music offers? Can music open our ears and our hearts so that we can better sense the nuance and subtleties of the world around us? If we open our mouths and sing our imperfect songs, can we connect with the divine songs of all creation? Can our prayer chants open the gates of heaven? These are the questions and hopes that animate this course.

Music has been part of the Jewish story since the beginning, both in our texts and in our lives. This first unit begins to explore this ancient connection by looking at the important role music has in prophecy, one of the most ancient ways of talking to God and of God talking through us.

“THE HAND/SPIRIT OF GOD”

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

Before jumping into the learning, spend a few minutes with your *havruta* and ask each other the following questions:

1. What is the role of music in your life? In your life as a Jew? In your spiritual life?
2. What kinds of music do you enjoy or identify with the most?

Now, as Jews we understand that we don’t have prophecy anymore. But perhaps we can still learn about music by learning about prophecy.

Intro

In these first two texts from the Prophets (Nevi'im), you can see the centrality of music to prophecy, first with the prophet Elisha, and then with King Saul.

♦ Spirit of God

“The phrase “spirit of God”—sometimes a translation of Hebrew “Ruah Elohim” or “Ruah Adonai”—is a common phrase to describe prophetic inspiration (e.g. Genesis 41:38, Isaiah 11:2), or related concepts like God acting in the world (e.g. Genesis 1:2) or on a person (e.g. 1 Samuel 16:14). The phrase “hand of God, Yad Adonai” is therefore surprising and unusual in the Kings context (although see Ezekiel 37:1 where it is contrasted with “spirit of God” directly; a usual use of “hand of God” might be in the way the Israelites describe the plagues in Egypt in Exodus 16:3). This confusion led to many scholars citing this passage incorrectly and subconsciously replacing “hand of God” with “spirit of God,” e.g. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piezetzener Rebbe, in his essay on the nigun (which we will encounter extracts of in a future session).”

SOURCE #1

מלכים ב ג: טו

וַעֲתָה קָחוּ-לִי מִנְגֵן
וְהָיָה כְּנִגֹן הַמִּנְגֵן
וַתְּהִי עָלָיו יַד-יְקֹנָק:

2 Kings 3:15

[Elisha said:] “But now bring me a musician.” And when the musician played, the hand of God came upon him.

SOURCE #2

שמואל א י:ה-ו

⁵...וַיְהִי כְּבָאֵךְ
שָׁם הָעִיר וּפָגַעְתָּ חֶבֶל
נְבִיאִים יֹרְדִים מִהַבְּמָה
וּלְפָנֵיהֶם נֶבֶל וְתֵנָּה וְחָלִיל
וְכִנּוֹר וְהִמָּה מִתְנַבְּאִים:

⁶וַיִּצְלַחַּה עָלֶיךָ רוּחַ יְקֹנָק וַהֲתַנְּבִיתָ
עִמָּם וְנִהְפַכְתָּ לְאִישׁ אֲחֵר:

1 Samuel 10:5-6

⁵... [Samuel said:] When you [King Saul] reach the city, you will encounter a band of prophets descending from the high place, before them a harp, drum, and flute, and they will prophesy.

⁶The spirit of God will rush over you, and you will prophesy with them, transforming into a different person.

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

1. “The hand/spirit of God” ♦ in these texts is a way of referring to prophetic inspiration. Music is always in part a performance, even if it comes along with something greater, like bringing a community together in song. Perhaps the same could be said about prophecy, of transmitting God’s will.

Why else might you think it is specifically music that triggers prophecy?

2. With Elisha, “the hand of God came upon him,” but with Saul there is the much more detailed, “the spirit of God will rush over you... and you will transform into a different person.”

Do you think there’s an actual difference in the experience each text describes, or do you think they are describing the same experience with different words? Have you ever experienced anything that could be described with either of these descriptions?

3. “Transforming into a different person” could be referring to Saul becoming a prophet (temporarily) or him being crowned king, which he is after this episode. In what ways do you see music transform people?

◆ **Meir ibn Gabbai** was a Spanish kabbalist in the 15th-16th centuries. Little is known about his life, but we have three of his books, of which *Avodat Ha-Kodesh*, “The Service of the Holy One,” is the most widely known.

ALL PROPHETS NEEDED MUSIC—EXCEPT MOSES

These prophetic texts above describe a world where prophets required music to hear the word of God. And on the flip side, there is an assumption that music has the potential to awaken prophecy in those that hear it—just like King Saul joining the prophetic troupe.

Meir ibn Gabbai uses these same two texts to show this point, and also clarifies that there was an exception to the rule: Moses.

SOURCE #3

ר' מאיר אבן גבאי,
עבודת הקודש, חלק ד -
סתרי תורה, פרק כג

לא הוצרך כל ימיו עליו השלום
לשום התעוררות ממיני
הניגונים להשרות עליו רוח
נבואה כי לא נסתלק מעליו כלל
ותמיד היה מוכן ועומד אין לו
מונע מצד עצמו כלל, לפי שאין
בכחו למעלה שום הסתלקות
רוח ושפע אורה ולזה היה
בדוגמא ההיא, מה שאין כן
בשאר הנביאים ע"ה
שיצטרכו למיני הניגון לעורר
עליהם הרוח ולהשרות עליהם
הנבואה וכמו שכתוב “ופגעת
חבל נביאים ירדים מהבמה
ולפניהם נבל ותף וחליל וכנור
והמה מתנבאים,” וכתוב “ועתה
קחו לי מנגן והיה כנגן המנגן
ותהי עליו יד יי”:

Meir ibn Gabbai,◆
Avodat Ha-Kodesh Vol. 4,
Sitrei Torah, ch 23

All his days, [Moses] never required any stimulation from any kind of *nigun* (melody) to invoke the spirit of prophecy, for it never withdrew from him at all, always at the ready, from his side, never refraining at all, as, in his supernal power, there is no withdrawal of spirit or the flow of [divine] light, and this was his paradigm. This was not the case with the rest of the prophets, peace be upon them, who needed *nigunim* (melodies) to awaken the spirit and invoke prophecy upon them, as it is written, “you will encounter a band of prophets descending from the high place, before them a harp, drum, and flute, and they will prophesy,” and, “Now, get me a musician, and as he plays his melody, the hand of God will be on him.”

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

1. Ibn Gabbai contrasts Moses' higher prophetic ability to that of all other prophets: other prophets needed music to hear the word of God, except for Moses. It seems

◇ **in this regard**

Think of this question in the context of Deuteronomy 34:10, “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom God singled out, face to face...”

like in the background of this is that the Torah describes Moses as talking with God “face-to-face” (e.g. Exodus 33:11), but he didn’t quote this explicitly.

How does he use the texts he quotes from Samuel and Kings to bolster his point?

2. The “mechanical” reason Moses is the exception to the normal rules of prophecy is because, in ibn Gabbai’s understanding, the spirit of prophecy “never withdrew from him at all” such that he never needed to get it back through music. The other prophets lived most of their life without the spirit and could only access it when they needed it through music.

What about Moses’ character or place in tradition makes him unique in this regard? ◇

3. Based on this text, we could construct two models of tiered access to God. It could be that there are three such tiers:
 - a. Moses, at the top, who always had the access to the spirit;
 - b. other prophets, who needed music to access the spirit;
 - c. us, who have no access to it at all.

Alternatively, you could instead use Moses’ exceptional status and instead have two tiers:

- a. Moses, who always had access to the spirit;
- b. everyone else, including the prophets, who can have access to the spirit through music.

What do you think about these two models? Which is more attractive to your worldview? Why? (In what ways) do you feel that you can access or connect to God through music?

4. Taking music as a metaphor for prophecy, God is to the prophet as the musician is to the instrument—the prophet allows themselves to be “played” by God and be the “instrument” of God’s will, to “awaken the spirit.”

How might you extend this idea to us non-prophets today?



THE HARP AWAKENS THE KING

Someone who was not a prophet but whose heart was awakened through music was King David, the mythical author of the psalms and renowned warrior. The Talmud narrates his nightly routine:

SOURCE #4

תלמוד בבלי ברכות דף ג עמוד ב

(1) כנור היה תלוי למעלה ממטתו של דוד, וכיון שהגיע חצות לילה בא רוח צפונית ונושבת בו ומנגן מאליו,

(2) מיד היה עומד ועוסק בתורה עד שעלה עמוד השחר.

(3) כיון שעלה עמוד השחר נכנסו חכמי ישראל אצלו, אמרו לו: אדונינו המלך, עמך ישראל צריכין פרנסה. אמר להם: לכו והתפרנסו זה מזה. אמרו לו: אין הקומץ משביע את הארי ואין הבור מתמלא מחוליתו.

(4) מר להם: לכו ופשטו ידיכם בגדוד.

Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 3b

1) A harp was hung above the bed of David, and once midnight arrived, a northern wind would blow on it, making its own melody.

2) David awoke at once and delved into Torah until dawn broke.

3) After the break of dawn, the wise ones of Israel entered, saying to him, "Our lord, the king, your people Israel need sustenance." He said to them, "They should go and sustain each other." They said to him, "A handful cannot satisfy a lion, and a pit cannot be filled with clumps of dirt."

4) He said to them, "Go out and take plunder [i.e. make war]."

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

1. Take each section of the text separately. After each one:
 - a. What is your picture of King David?
 - b. What is he thinking?
 - c. What kind of person is he?
 - d. What are his interests and passions?
2. One reading of section 3 is that he is very reluctant to do anything for his kingdom, but only to listen to the music of his harp and to study. And yet, he is tethered to his role in life, that he has to find resources to feed and sustain his people, which he decides to do, in section 4, through war. Why do you think he comes to this ultimate decision? What does this say about his character?
3. How does music help you come to terms with your struggles?
4. In a time before alarm clocks, David was woken every night by the wind playing his harp. What are the things that wake you up?



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Visiting the Sick: A Talmudic Exploration

R. Avital Hochstein

SESSION 1 Introduction to Visiting the Sick
UNIT 3 Sickness is Natural, Or Even Required

♦ Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud was the magnum opus of the Babylonian Jewish community, compiled around the 6th century in modern day Iraq, but containing many earlier traditions. While organized as a commentary on the Mishnah, the Talmud often digresses and talks about other topics. There is no section of the Talmud devoted to visiting the sick, but this section of Nedarim (otherwise focused on different kinds of vows) is the Talmud's most sustained discussion of the topic.

SESSION INTRODUCTION

Is visiting the sick a *mitzvah* (commandment)? We assume it is, but what is the source in the Torah? We will discuss the talmudic debate on the matter, and the ramifications of visiting the sick being a *mitzvah* from the Torah, as the Talmud suggests.

There is no direct commandment in the Torah to visit the sick; when the sages discuss the *mitzvah*, they seek hints in the Torah. The sages offer a very vague source, which teaches us more about the positions of the sages towards illness and the sick than it does about the source for visiting the sick.

SOURCE #1

תלמוד בבלי
נדרים דף לט עמוד ב
אמר ריש לקיש: רמז לביקור
חולין מן התורה מניין?
שנאמר: (במדבר טז, כט) "אם
כמות כל האדם ימותון אלה
ופקודת כל אדם" וגו'.
מאי משמע?
אמר רבא: "אם כמות כל
האדם ימותון אלה" שהן
חולים ומוטלים בעריסתן
ובני אדם מבקרים אותן, מה
הבריות אומרים? "לא ה'
שלחני לזה".

Babylonian Talmud ♦ Nedarim 39b

Resh Lakish said: Where is visiting the sick indicated in the Torah?

In the verse, "If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men" etc. (Numbers 16:29 [ס]).

How is it implied?

Rava said: [The verse means this:] If these men die the common death of all men, who lie sick a-bed and men come in and visit them, what will people say? "God did not sent me for this [task]."

In order to understand Rava's opinion, we must look at the story in the Torah which contains this verse: the story of Korah and his rebellion. While the Israelites are wandering through the desert, Korah and his men rise up and rebel against Moses' and Aaron's leadership. The dispute ends with the ground opening up and swallowing Korah and his band of supporters.

SOURCE #2

במדבר טז:א-ד, כח-לב

¹וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן־יִזְחָר בֶּן־
קֹהַת בֶּן־לֵוִי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם
בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאוֹן בֶּן־פִּלֶּת בְּנֵי
רְאוּבֵן: ²וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה
וְאֲנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים
וּמֵאָתָּים נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קָרְאוּ
מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־שֵׁם: ³וַיִּקְהֻלוּ
עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ
אֵלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה
כֻּלָּם קֳדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכָם ה'ִ
וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהֹל ה':

⁴וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פָּנָיו:...

²⁸וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תֵּדָעוּן
כִּי־ה' שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל־
הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי־לֹא מִלְּבִי:
²⁹אִם־כְּמוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם יָמָתוּן
אֵלֶּה וּפְקַדַת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִפְקַד
עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא ה' שְׁלַחְנִי: ³⁰וְאִם־
בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא ה' וּפְצָתָהּ
הָאֲדָמָה אֶת־פִּיהָ וּבָלְעָה אֹתָם
וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ
חַיִּים שְׁאֵלָה וַיִּדְעָתָם כִּי נֶאֱצַו
הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־ה': ³¹וַיְהִי
כִּבְלָתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים

Numbers 16:1-4, 28-32 ♦

¹Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohat son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. ³They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?”

⁴When Moses heard this, he fell on his face...

²⁸And Moses said, “By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: ²⁹if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the Lord who sent me. ³⁰But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord.” ³¹Scarcely had he finished speaking all

הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּבָּקַע הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם:
וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם³²
וְאֶת־בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר
לְקִרְחָן וְאֶת כָּל־הָרִכּוּשׁ:

these words when the ground under them burst asunder,
³²and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them
up with their households, all Korah's people and all their
possessions.

Questions from R. Avital Hochstein

Verse 29 is the one that appears in Rava's interpretation.

1. What is the meaning of the verse in the story? How does Rava make use of it in his interpretation?

Rava's interpretation comes from his position that an ordinary death is progressive, a death that includes sickness which demands lying in bed and guests which come to visit the sick.

That is the description of a standard death process, as opposed to a sudden—possibly even unnatural—death.

2. Discuss: To the sick person and those around them—what is the difference between a sudden death as opposed to a death following illness? What does death due to illness allow?
3. Have you ever spent time with a dying person? Was it the type of death that Rava described, “as all people”? What defined the experience?

Rava's commentary on the verse presents a fascinating approach to illness: there is no charged or negative connotation to illness and the death that follows, it is simply the way of the world. Theologically, death without a period of illness that allows visitation is a bad sign, like the death of Korah and his followers.

Take a Step Back

In one of the opening discussions by the Talmud on the topic of visiting the sick, illness is presented as a natural part of the death process, a positive process—as opposed to a sudden death, which is perceived the story as a punishment. What do you think of this approach?

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